# Congressional Testimony for the Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations

Hearing: "Occupational and Environmental Health Surveillance of Deployed Forces: Tracking Toxic Casualties"

### **OUTLINE**

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- 4. Treatment of the HAZMAT Effected Soldier and Closing Statement

# 1. Opening Statement and Introduction

I would like to thank the Honorable Christopher Shays and the fellow members of the Subcommittee. It is an honor for me to testify on behalf of myself, my fellow service members and the soldiers that I lead. I am Sergeant Major Brian Scott La Morte; I am a company sergeant major in a National Guard Special Forces Group. I was deployed to Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan in April 2002 with the Advance Party of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Forces Group (ABN). The first mission tasked to me was to secure, clean up, and improve the living conditions at the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force Afghanistan's (CJSOTFA), Advanced Operation Base, (AOB) North, located in Bagram, Afghanistan. During my initial pre-mission planning trip, I was able to observe the living conditions of team safe houses located on the Pakistani boarder as well as the AOB North. After that mission, I was living at the Kandahar Airfield for most of my duration in theater. I witnessed the airfield from April 2002 thru October 2002. While there was great improvement made during that time with in the country, the base still had a long way to go.

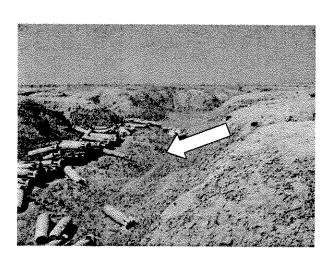
# 2. Nature of War and the HAZMAT Connection

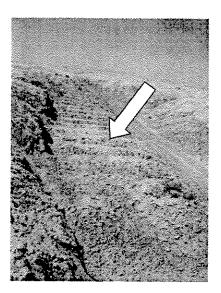
### a. Initial Contact

While I was not included in the first contact of the Afghanistan Campaign I know the nature of war. Death and destruction are the norms for daily contact. The amount of vehicles that were destroyed along with the human carnage was unheard of by so few of our forces on the ground. Today's military is capable of enormous amounts of destruction with our advanced fire power that is on call from the Air Force and Navy, from 2,000 pound, laser guided bombs, 30mm Depleted Uranium tank busting rounds to the conventional explosives used to destroy tons of recovered Taliban/ al Quida material and munitions on a daily bases. Destruction of cached material and explosives, lead to many fires that burned for countless days unattended. As the Taliban moved out of their bases as fast as they could, they left many tons of captured Soviet/ Afghani equipment hidden or scattered about. One such example is the enclosed picture of some of over (436) 1,100 lb, aerial dropped bombs of different types that the Taliban had tried to bury in the desert to hide from the advancing Coalition Forces moving into the Kandahar region.



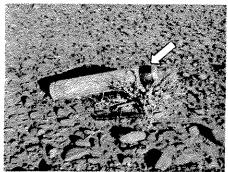
Here is a prime example of the mistakes that we have made in the past two conflicts, Desert Storm and Operation Enduring Freedom. The next two pictures are from the same cache which shows buried munitions that were never identified. Like the explosion in Desert Storm of the Ammunition Depot that contained chemical weapons which were never identified until after their improper destruction. We faced a similar chance to do the same again. I reminded the EOD Officer in Charge of the necessity to identify all of the weapons before destroying the cache. He felt it more important to destroy the cache in place as is, rather than exposing his troops to possible booby trapped bombs. Remember that EOD personnel had been killed 6 months beforehand. I again protested to him that they might be chemical or nuclear weapons and they should be ID'ed first.





Arrows indicate buried weapons that were never identified. Picture on the right was thirty meters away and never had explosives placed on the mounds. EOD commander felt that they would explode sympathetically when the other kilo ton of explosives were detonated.

If the mounds had contained a chemical weapon EOD felt it would burn up in the fire ball following the blast. If nuclear it would be ruined beyond use. My point is that it is a weapon of information for our side. It was Soviet doctrine to carry nuclear and chemical weapons to the battle field front. I found possible chemical weapons in the barren waste land and no one wanted to admit to the possibility that chemical weapons were in Afghanistan. It seemed to me if they would have been found the rounds would have caused more complications and it was better to be ignorant of the facts than to deal with them.

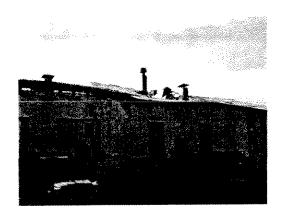


This round was found within a mile of the mounds and 436 aerial dropped weapons that were destroyed in late Sep '02. The corroded body and the burster charge, (see arrow), are indicators of chemical weapons. It is a known fact that chemical warfare was used by Soviets in the early 80's in Afghanistan.

# b. Establishing Base Camps/ Firebases

The condition of Kandahar Airfield in April '02 was showing signs of becoming organized. The Special Forces Compound which housed Forward Operating Base 32, (FOB32), 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Special Forces Group (Abn), under LTC Sherwood, was located in the middle of the base. Directly behind the 3/3 SF motor pool was the trash dump that was pushed out of the way to make room for more troops. The trash dump contained everything from human bones, armored vehicles to airplanes and helicopters. The entire time I was in the area the dump was on fire. Smoke from burning rubber, oil and wood was drifting across the base. The smell was incredible, putrid I can not think of a better way to describe it. I was conscious of the smoke and wore a rag over my face when it was really bad. Was there anything that could be done? Perhaps, fighting the fire would have been a start, but it was not raging out of control just a smoldering smudge pot that was more of a nuisance than anything else. By the time I left, the 733<sup>rd</sup> Facility Engineer Team was establishing a good working solution to the HAZMAT environment at Kandahar. (See attachment "One-Stop Waste Disposal").

My time at the Advanced Operations Base (North), Bagram, Afghanistan, May to July 02, was spent cleaning up after the Taliban, 5th Special Forces Group, and 3rd Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> SFG. The building we occupied had been damaged at some point in the war. Possible mortar attacks had left large holes in the roof and no windows in the building. Likely it never seemed to rain while I was there. The dust had free rein and was in everything in the building. The dust was so fine, that if you opened the plastic wrapping of a CD package, there was already dust in it. The roof itself was made of tile shingles and they were made of a material containing asbestos. The tile from the roof was everywhere. We had moved most of the tiles that were lose on the ground before finding out that they had asbestos in them. The facility improvement officer came to our compound one day to announce that the roof would be replaced by a local contractor, (HAZMAT qualified contractors?) and we had to supply the security detail while they worked. The roof was dismantled and trucked away to the dump outside of the front gate. Daily, the contractors dropped tiles down into the living and kitchen area in the AOB. We tried our best to keep them from doing so, but they found ways to avoid walking to the side of the roof where the truck was parked if they did not have to.



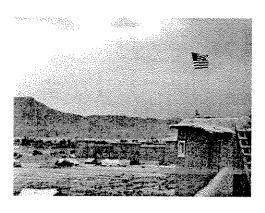
Picture of the AOB North's damaged roof with asbestos tiles. Note the water tank in the fore ground. This was filed twice a week with water for showers and for washing clothes. No one could guess what had been stored in the tank before we got there.



This is a picture of the AOB North's roof after the asbestos tiles were removed in June 02. A sheet metal roof was installed by local contractors. No HAZMAT techniques were used for the removal of the roof or disposal of the tile. Tile was dumped outside of the main gate in the land fill. This job was done while the building was occupied by three SF Teams.

### c. Establishing Safe Houses

Safe houses ran far and wide, neat and efficient to dirty and disorganized. I was shocked when I was at the safe houses in Gardez, AFG. There were two houses within two hundred meters of each other, one the National Guard and one Active Duty SF team in each. The National Guard house was neat, but far from clean. They had a camel and dogs in the compound, defecating all over the court yard. I did not go past the court yard in that building. The active 3<sup>rd</sup> Group SF house was busy and cramped, a SOF Coalition Team, Radio Intercept Team, USAF Combat Control Team and one 3/3 SF Team lived in a walled compound which had fruit trees inside the court yard. It was cluttered with cargo parachutes sitting in the sun, (not good for the life of the chutes). I saw discarded food lying on the ground around the dish washing station, a sure vector for disease. The out house is built into the corners of the compounds, with people living and working next to the outhouse with only a mud wall between them.



Looking from the 3<sup>rd</sup> SF Group's compound towards the National Guard compound two hundred meters away. The flag is flying from the top of were the outhouse is located. Note the door to the toilet located under the ladder. It is a two story drop to the bottom of the latrine. This is the traditional way the Afghani live and is considered to be very high brow.



Seen here are parachutes rotting in the sun, but home to a local dog. These parachutes are recovered and reused. The deterioration of the fabric can cause a total malfunction, resulting in loss of equipment and possible life on the ground.

I talked to the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Group Commander about this problem and I am sure it was apathy on the part of the leadership and the team medics that this kind of behavior could be attributed to. Poor training on the Army's part, perhaps, but the bottom line is the team leadership should have done a better job of policing their staff's daily living conditions.

### 3. Post Deployment Testing

Upon our return to Ft. Bragg, NC and the DMOB station, in October '02, the company was taken to out process. The medical station included a haphazard check up. To my dismay, my injuries were passed over as the Doctor reviewed my records. One sheet I filled out asked if I had any concerns after my return. I had stated that I had a persistent cough, (I thought it might be from all the dust), I had an injury to my back and one to my shoulder and reoccurring nightmares, (the anti-malaria drugs gave us vivid dreams and night sweats), exposed to nerve agents while in Taranac Farms, (training area for the Taliban and used by the coalition forces at Kandahar, AFG), and exposure to Depleted Uranium rounds. I had lesions on my face that have never been sampled and the other soldiers that have been tested have never been answered as to what it is. The Doctor stated to me that I was fit to return to my civilian job. I asked him if he had actually read my file. He assured me he had, where upon I told him that the first page stated that I had been in an accident and injured my back, (latter it was determined that is had been fractured as well as my left femur). I noted my coughing to him and he said that was common with the men returning from the Afghanistan Theater. I demanded to stay on active duty and to apply for active duty medical treatment. I stayed at Bragg for three months, received test for nerve damage in my arm, chiropractor for my back pain and that was all that I could get done before being denied an extension for medical care.

Where are the tests for Asbestos Exposure, Heavy Metal Exposure, Silica Exposure (Fine Dust Particles) and infectious diseases? All HAZMAT related tests.

# 4. Treatment of the HAZMAT Effected Soldier and Closing Statement

To date, my company has had two soldiers medically retired due to injuries and illnesses. I lost a soldier to a self inflicted wound, (never determined to be PSD or due to the anti malaria drugs). We never were tested for Nerve Agents, heavy metal or intestinal parasites. Those of us in Bagram need to be looked at for Asbestos exposure as well. Even the article from the Army "Engineer" Professional Bulletin of Army Engineers, Oct-Dec 2004, makes note of the exposure that we faced and that was just at Kandahar. I and my fellow soldiers are willing to face combat and the dangers that it brings us, but what I find disturbing is the looking the other way when its time to treat or even test the members who are so willing to face bodily harm. The right thing needs to be done, step up the monitoring and the treatment and documentation of the exposure. It may take years for things to show up, look back historically at Viet Nam, WWII and even WWI. The veteran has paid the ultimate price, their body for your freedoms. We owe it to each and every one, the best in quality health care today and tomorrow. Thank you for your time and the chance to be heard.



War is Hell,
You can tell,
Through the smoke we yell,
And the fires that swell.

To you, who we serve so well...
Remember, War is Hell
From those that fell,
And heard the lonely bell....

BS La Morte

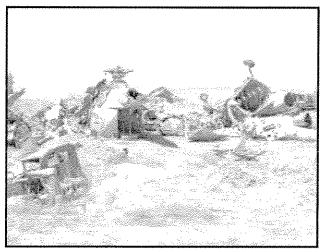
# "One-Stop" Waste Disposal — Enhancing Force Protection in Afghanistan

By Lieutenant Colonel Garth Anderson and Lieutenant Colonel Whitney Wolf

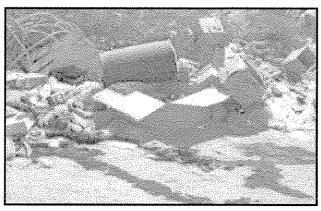
Sound environmental practices in the theater of operations, principally hazardous and solid waste management, are truly an area of force protection. How much waste can a contingency base camp generate? Seemingly more than it can handle. By Spring 2002, units at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, were faced with a growing human health and environmental threat caused by huge amounts of waste that required collection, management, and disposal. This waste, not just from US forces, included vast amounts of destroyed equipment, trash, and hazardous waste left behind by Taliban forces that were routed away from the airfield.

### Uncontrolled Waste Disposal

uring the initial stages of base camp development, there were no easy disposal solutions. Most of the land in and around the airfield was potentially laden with mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO), which meant waste collection, consolidation, and disposal activities were limited to cleared locations close to soldier living and work areas within the camp. Off-site disposal was not an option since the local population was still unfriendly, and local disposal facilities did not exist. The first disposal area at the airfield consisted of a shallow trash burn pit surrounded by a large junkyard of old Soviet equipment, barrels of hazardous waste, discarded US materiel, trash, and small-caliber ammunition. This disposal site was uncontrolled, and many



Abandoned Soviet military equipment near the old burn pit



Hazardous waste disposal at the old burn pit

items—regardless of their potential hazard or reuse value—were thrown into or around the burn pit. The uncontrolled nature of the disposal area created a number of unacceptable conditions:

- Soldiers entering the area to dispose of waste were at risk for potential exposure to smoke from burning debris, exploding aerosol cans and food containers, and unknown hazardous waste.
- The burn pit's proximity to the center of the camp allowed smoke to drift over living and work areas, creating a potential risk to soldier health.
- Hazardous waste (primarily petroleum, oil, and lubricant [POL] products) was uncontained, allowing the possible leaching of contaminants into the groundwater. Since the airfield depended on a single well to supply all of its nonpotable and most of its potable water, this threat was unacceptable.
- Soldiers threw nonburnable debris into the burn pit, causing it to fill up quickly and resulting in the need to dig a new emergency pit.
- Units discarded and destroyed large amounts of reusable or recyclable material (such as lumber, vehicle parts, equipment, metals, and concertina wire).
- The area was used for improper disposal of medical waste.

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In April 2002, Facility Engineer Team (FET) 18 of the US Army Facility Engineer Group (USAFEG) arrived at Kandahar Airfield and joined the staff of the Brigade Combat Team. The FET was manned by seven engineering, environmental, and construction professionals and was augmented by a US Army Corps of Engineers liaison officer. After setting up public works operations at the camp, the FET and the brigade staff began preparing the base master plan. A key component of this plan was environmental management, especially the collection and disposal of hazardous and solid waste. Given the conditions of the waste disposal area, commanders agreed that environmental management was a force protection issue and gave it the appropriate priority.

Several challenges faced the FET as it gained control over the waste management issues:

- Land for a new disposal area had to be cleared of mines and UXO.
- An upcoming transfer of authority between Brigade Combat Teams meant that departing units would be generating enormous amounts of waste as they cleaned and loaded equipment.
- Large amounts of improperly disposed of hazardous waste still needed to be collected and contained.

### Controlled Waste Disposal

plan that effectively balanced simplicity with effectiveness. First, the new disposal area needed to be as far away from the main part of the camp as possible to minimize exposure to smoke. Second, sound waste disposal needed to be easy. If it is too difficult and complex to comply with the requirements, then midnight dumping occurs, making the problem even worse. The basic concept became "one-stop shopping" for all disposal requirements—all forms of waste disposal located in one spot. This allowed a logical and controlled process that made it easy for units to comply. This facility, with easy access from the road, consisted of a recycling area, hazardous waste storage cells, a medical waste incinerator, and a large burn pit with controlled access.

### Usable Materials

The first stop at the facility was the recycling area where units dropped off potentially usable materials, especially lumber and scrap metal. This provided numerous benefits to the camp—units could reuse these materials for building furniture, packing for shipping, fabricating parts, and repairing equipment. Lumber was scarce and expensive, and this was a great cost saving and a relief on resupply channels. And keeping the nonburnable material out of the burn pit greatly extended the life of the pit.

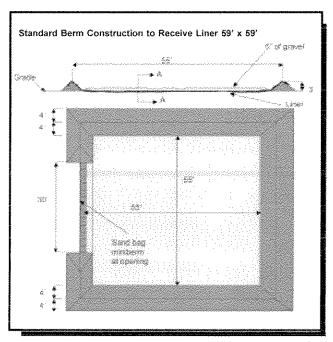
### Hazardous Waste

The next stop was the hazardous waste holding area. This facility consisted of six bermed and lined cells, each 40 by 40 feet. Liners for the cells were unserviceable fuel bladders that



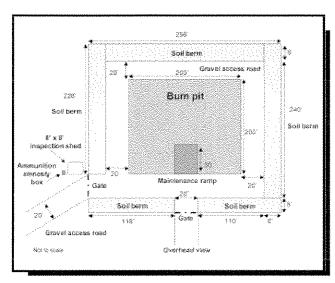
Soldiers dumping at the old burn pit were exposed to hazards of burning trash.

were drained, cut open, dried, laid flat, and covered with gravel. Soldiers then placed each type of waste (such as POL, batteries, and solvents) into separate designated cells, to comply with segregation requirements. Labeling standards were minimal to maintain simplicity and facilitate compliance with proper storage. Waste characterization, labeling, and preparation for shipment would be a task for the future base support contractor. Final disposal of hazardous waste would come later when a theaterwide disposal contract was in place. But until that time, the waste was effectively segregated, contained, and away from troop living and work areas.

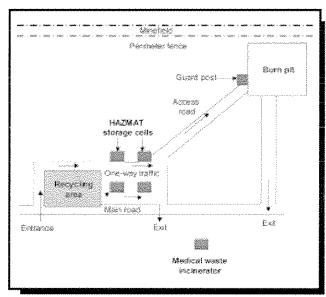


Hazardous waste holding cell design

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New burn pit design



Layout of the one-stop waste disposal area

#### **Burn Pit**

Once all reusable materials and hazardous waste were dropped off, the unit vehicle could then proceed to the burn pit. The FET incorporated several features into the design and construction of the pit. Most importantly, it was controlled. The pit was surrounded by a berm and barbed wire, and the single point of entry was gated and manned by a guard, who inspected loads to ensure that only appropriate waste was placed in the pit. The entry also featured an ammunition amnesty box, which kept hundreds of dangerous rounds from being placed in the fire. The burn pit (250 by 250 feet in area and 12 feet deep) was large enough to have a reasonable life span of 2 to 3 years. The large size allowed safe standoff between areas of the pit that were actively burning or smoldering and designated spots where units would dump

their loads, minimizing the likelihood of an injury from exploding debris. An entrance ramp allowed access by dozers and compactors to perform routine maintenance, also extending the life of the pit.

### **Medical Waste**

Requirements for disposal of medical waste are more stringent than those for solid waste due to the potential bio-hazard of medical waste. Therefore, a small incinerator for medical waste was placed adjacent to the disposal area. The base support contractor was responsible for the operation and maintenance of the incinerator.

### Conclusion

I ying the entire waste management program together required the vigilance of the unit chain of command and the base operations staff. As a result of the experience gained in its peacetime mission of environmental assessments at US Army Reserve Centers nationwide, the FET was able to provide expert environmental staff work. The FET also acted as the commander's eyes and ears to ensure that soldiers were complying with unit and Army environmental standards.

Sound environmental management in contingency operations is an important facet of force protection. It is necessary to minimize soldier exposure to potentially harmful contaminants and hazardous conditions at uncontrolled waste disposal areas and burn pits. To facilitate good waste disposal practices, the process needs to incorporate simplicity for the soldier and the unit, design and construction of facilities that provide access control and waste containment, and continuous enforcement by the chain of command. A properly designed and built one-stop waste disposal facility is a key component of a good environmental program that helps soldiers remain healthy and able to accomplish their critical mission outside the wire.

Lieutenant Colonel Anderson is the Commander, 733d Facility Engineer Detachment, Kansas City, Missouri. He was the team leader of FET 18, USAFEG, Kandahar, Afghanistan, and has served as S3 of 2d Brigade, 383d Training Support Battalion, as well as civil and mechanical engineer positions in the USAFEG. Lieutenant Colonel Anderson holds a bachelor's in civil engineering from the US Military Academy and a master's in environmental engineering from the University of Illinois.

Lieutenant Colonel Wolf is the team leader of FET 16, Omaha, Nebraska. He was the operations and environmental officer, FET 18, USAFEG, Kandahar, Afghanistan. He has held civil and mechanical engineer positions in USAFEG and was an operations research/systems analyst at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Lieutenant Colonel Wolf holds a degree in civil engineering from Missouri Western State College.

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